

TALENTED MILITANTS BUILD BROTHERS AND SISTERS MOVEMENT

Lessons from a militant **tent city** movement, 2014-19

Written and edited by RED BRAID ALLIANCE

TO BUILD A POOR
PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT
Lessons from a militant tent
city movement, 2014-2019

Red Braid Alliance
for Decolonial Socialism

THE VOLCANO
2019

A VOLCANO BOOK

2019 by Red Braid Alliance for Decolonial Socialism

The contents of this book are the property of the international movement of Indigenous peoples and working class communities. Please let us know if you are using any section of this book for movement purposes. If you would like to use these materials for any purposes within settler colonial or bourgeois institutions (ie. corporate or non-profit newspapers, universities, high schools), please make arrangements (and donations) in advance. Do not make money from republishing anything from this work. Our work is unpaid and very precariously funded and can very much use whatever funds you can wring from the hands of the man.

Published by Volcano Books

10679 King George Highway, Surrey BC, Canada, V3T 2X6

<http://thevolcano.org>

This collection was previously published as “To Build a Poor People’s Movement: Fighting capitalism and colonialism from the margins to the centre of Canadian society,” as the program for a gathering held on June 8th 2019 in Victoria BC, which brought together 60 delegates from 8 different tent cities and former tent cities in southern British Columbia.

Thanks to Marilou Gagnon, Ashley Mollison, Bernie Pauly, and Phoebe Ramsay, who coordinated the logistics of this gathering, and organized the funding from the Vancouver Foundation.

Design: Ivan Drury

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	4
Introduction	16
Part 1: Experiences	25
Anita Place Tent City	28
Camp Namegans	30
Surrey Strip	33
Discontent City	36
Dignity Village	40
Super InTent Society	43
Vancouver camps	45
We Exist Tent City	48
Part 2: Founding documents	52
Four Principles for a Tent City Movement	52
Founding statement of the Schoolhouse Squat	55
Part 3: Issues	62
Making space to deal with our shit	62
Decolonizing the fight for home	65
Fighting back against patriarchy!	69
Forming a camp “Security Council”	72
Community controlled health and collective care	75
Abolish supportive housing	80
The limits of “rights” for homeless people	84

We acknowledge that this gathering took place on the “Douglas” treaty territories of the Lekwungen and Xwsepsum nations. As we fight to end displacement and dispossession on these occupied territories, upon which most of us are uninvited guests, we seek to honour and restore land title and sovereignty to the original peoples of these lands.

Preface

Four Years of a militant tent city movement: Looking back and looking forward

This booklet was published to support a gathering of delegates from 8 tent city struggles (Victoria, Saanich, Nanaimo, Vancouver, Maple Ridge, Surrey, Abbotsford, Coquitlam) that took place in Lekwungen and Xwsepsum Territory (Victoria, BC) on June 8th, 2019.

The gathering was convened by Alliance Against Displacement (AAD) with Ashley Mollison, Bernie Pauly, Marilou Gagnon, and Phoebe Ramsay. It was made possible by a grant from the Vancouver Foundation. The materials in this booklet were assembled by AAD, since renamed Red Braid Alliance for Decolonial Socialism.

The documents in the first section, “experiences,” were written by Red Braid members after organizing meetings in each community to prepare for the tent city gathering. They reflect the unique experiences of each community in their tent city and homeless community struggles. These reports are the basis for the first part of the discussions at the gatherings, where

each tent city group will answer a single question based on their experiences document.

The documents in the second section, “founding documents,” were written by communities in struggle at previous events. We chose the “four principles for a tent city movement” document that was drafted in Victoria at a gathering of homeless people from many communities in 2016 as the founding document of the tent city movement that has been. And the Schoolhouse Squat founding declaration because, although the squat, which lasted for 19 hours in October 5-6, 2018, has not yet been repeated, we hope that squatting will be part of the next phase of the poor people’s movement.

The documents in the third section, “issues,” come from a few different places. Some are from tent cities, some are articles, some come from the gathering’s preparatory discussions, and some are individually authored.

“LOOKING BACK”

The June 8th tent city gathering began with all 60 of us packed into a room together. Most of the people there had been elected in preparatory meetings in their communities to attend the gathering as representative delegates. When each of them, one at a time, stood and said the place they were from and the name of their tent city, the room swelled further with pride. No matter what happened in the course of the day, the gathering itself was a testament to the success of the 5 years of a militant tent city movement.

Ivan Drury, who was facilitating the meeting, tried to put this success into words. “No matter what laws they throw at us; what fences they put in; how many more police; no matter how much money they spend: we can still win because we don’t depend on money, we are relying on our solidarity,” he said.

The people in the room represented an accumulated hundreds of years of experience in militant tent city struggles, but even this was the tip of an iceberg. Beyond the recognized and formalized

politicized spaces of the named and represented camps, those delegates had many more years of experience on the street, before and after the politicized camps, in non politicized or less formal spaces of survival for unhoused people.

The first half of the gathering consisted of reflections from delegates from these 8 struggles on their own historical experiences with struggles. The main lessons and arguments from these reflections are included in documents that these delegates prepared in order to speak from at the gathering. But these documents lack the spontaneous and combined energy that crackled out as unhoused people stood and spoke in front of eachother on June 8th.

MAPLE RIDGE

The group from Anita Place tent city in Maple Ridge showed up at the gathering reeling from the then-months-long police attack on the 2-year old camp. Their comments focused on the need to make and keep a space to be together; to organize. Tracy Scott, a founder of Anita Place, said:

At Cliff Avenue, the first camp, we had a place. And then after the city broke that up, we had the Rain City shelter, where we could connect almost daily. We had access, we could get in to talk to our people.

The reason we started second tent city was because they lied to us. They said they would house us and would buy property and build housing. We started Anita Place tent city two weeks before the Provincial election in order to protest.

Dwayne Martin, who was one of the few still living in Anita Place, in a cabin he built out of scrap, said:

Before living in Anita Palce, I was embarrassed to admit I was homeless. It is fucking important here what is going on here today: we can change things. Once you are treated like a dog so long you become one. You can stop shit.

VICTORIA

Super InTent City was the host-group of the gathering in Victoria. Super InTent City had been broken up by court order in 2016, after the Province met the judge's condition of providing housing for everyone living at the camp. It was the unjust operation of that housing, and the lies from social workers, that Super InTent City delegates focused on. Anna, a leader from the camp and the struggle against the conditions in supportive housing, said:

It was really tough on us because of the number of deaths in that building since we moved in. PHS housing workers offered us the moon and the stars and it was a lie. Fighting the supportive housing model is like fighting against a prison guard. When you fight them they call the police and give us criminal charges. How do we fight this system that is so powerful and institutionalized?

We have learned big things from this experience. The housing workers are going to come try to sit down with you so they can lie to you. They'll offer you sandwiches. Don't take the sandwiches.

SAANICH

Camp Namegans, from Saanich, bordering Victoria, had been locked in a long battle against police throughout the summer of 2018. After being displaced from their camp with a court injunction, won by the City without having to provide any housing, police chased a dwindling number of camp residents from one stop to another, determined to break the Indigenous leadership of the struggle. Chrissy Brett was not broken. She said:

I started Camp Namegans because I was tired of losing my friends and people and thought I could use my culture. My status card is good for nothing except cheap smokes and cheap gas. Using their laws, we use our laws. We claimed

Camp Namegans was an urban reserve as a way to get ourselves together and to keep police out.

We have examples of other Indigenous leaders such as Leonard Pelletier and John Graham; we need to push that movement.

We need to bring our warriors in, but lets start with a conversation. Canada's governance is no different than Indigenous law.

SURREY

The Surrey Strip was never a formal tent city like the others at the gathering because it was never controlled by residents; it was always under the control of the RCMP and Surrey Bylaw. But, Wanda explained, that did not mean the Surrey Strip was not organized, or resisting.

Despite the brutality of the police occupation, we were able to stand together. But people were arrested. People were arrested and punished. It is possible but it is not easy.

It is so wrong what the police do every day. They victimize people because they are alone. So, to survive we formed our own separate groups on the strip. And we protected each other's stuff. As long as bylaw didn't get it I didn't care who did.

NANAIMO

Discontent City in Nanaimo was not the only camp that was attacked by vigilantes, but the attacks on Discontent City were uncommonly extreme. The delegates from Nanaimo reflected on how this external pressure, threats, and incidents of violence influenced life in their 400-strong camp.

Everyone armed themselves, so people would feel better about the danger outside. We armed ourselves to defend ourselves, but it affected how it felt to be inside camp. Some people made bombs, and once they went off and people got hurt.

At the worst moments, we turned on ourselves and didn't know who to trust. People worried that the Soldiers of Odin could have been inside. And because camp was so large, there was a split in camp. Part of the camp supported doing a counter rally against the Soldiers of Odin threat to attack the camp; understanding they were a threat. But a smaller part of camp sympathized with them. That created a division in the camp and how people interacted with each other.

Those dynamics exist in street communities. Racism exists. Sexism exists. When you have three external forces, there are going to be divisions and there are going to be survival tactics.

ABBOTSFORD

The delegates from Abbotsford had been part of Dignity Village, which was the group that won the Shantz decision in BC Supreme Court. Most of them continued to live out on Gladys Avenue. This long historical memory, from before the 2013 "Chicken Shit" incident, when city workers dumped chicken manure into and on top of homeless peoples' tents, that informed Nick's perspective:

Now, our struggles started long before they threw chicken shit on me and my relatives. Three of the four people that were living under the tree where they dumped that manure are still under the tree.

The Abbotsford Shuffle: we practiced that, trained it. Every morning at 9am: take down your tent, move your stuff. You cant go to the doctor, can't get a job. You have to carry your stuff around.

Once we had the camp, the power was in the people. Some people never talked before and started to open up.

VANCOUVER

The list of camps in Vancouver, even the list of camps that

people at the gathering had participated in directly, was long. Oppenheimer camp, 58 W. Hastings, Thornton Park tent city, 10 Year tent city, Sugar Mountain tent city, and the new Oppenheimer camp. The lessons from Vancouver were about power; about the standoff against police and bylaw officers. Samona explained:

Who controls the camp, controls the camp. If the community controls the gate to the camp, then the community can come in. If the police controls it, then the community has lost our power.

How to keep a camp from falling into chaos if the police have taken control?

TRI CITIES

The delegates from the Tri Cities had not yet started a tent city, but planned to start the We Exist tent city, a refusal of their erasure from the political landscape of the city, the week after the gathering. Ross explained why they needed a camp:

The Tri Cities model of managing homelessness is to harass homeless people constantly. When Bylaw officers find a tent in the woods, they give us a 2-3 day warning, come in, and it is gone.

They throw our people into jail. I go to jail drunk and I come out of the hospital. They throw homeless people in jail all the time for being drug users.

They take everything you have and leave you homeless. They tell us to go to Maple Ridge. I would rather stay in the bush. I watch cops control and destroy.

When Ross finished, the room fell silent. There was a tactile, thick, heavy feeling that together, these fighters were facing the enormity of the task before them.

One woman said, "Every place sounds worse than the next. The common theme is brutality."

And another, "The police are an arm of the government, they break things up when we try to get it started."

Shane, from Nanaimo, said, "People said it is better to be dead than live in Nanaimo. It sounds like it's like that in lots of places."

And one person spoke the will of the room when she said, "We have to fight for the future and fight for others and for those in the future. We have a right to live."

STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMOUS SPACE FOR WOMEN AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The second half of the gathering was spent in small groups that focused on discussing specific issues that have come up in the course of tent city struggles, and on applying these lessons for future actions.

The most significant controversy in the gathering was about whether poor peoples' movements should include autonomous organizing space for Indigenous and women fighters.

The women's safety leadership group said that women in tent cities had seen that "women learn to take a beating and men learn beating is what it means to be a man." They said, "We accept that this is our starting point, and that everyone will bring their trauma when they come into our community spaces, but we can change it. We can start to set up a better way of living and working together."

The solution the women's group proposed was that "tent cities should create a community that values women's leadership and that helps men to learn to take on emotional work and not expect women to do it." This is an important challenge of patriarchal power in poor people's communities, where many people survive on the street with "violent ways of relating to others, learned through their family experiences and intergenerational trauma."

To build movements against patriarchal violence within the poor people's movement requires dedicated space for women to

learn from each other, support each other, create resources like a transition tent for women escaping abusive relationships, and to organize together against violence, whether it comes from within the community, or from vigilantes or cops.

The Indigenous struggle and leadership group said that although the “majority of camps have Indigenous campers, they do not always have the same proportion of Indigenous leaders.” To develop that Indigenous leadership, they said, “it is important to have Indigenous spaces and specific groups in the movement.”

Some of the men in the room had grumbled when women said they wanted to have women-only groups and spaces, and that attitude came out more openly when Indigenous delegates called for autonomous organizing spaces. One non-Indigenous man said there was no need for an Indigenous-only space because “we understand each other’s issues.” He reflected a common belief in white-dominated low-income communities that poverty is so overwhelming that race and gender difference is not important, or that organizing against white race power and patriarchal power interrupts the unified fight of *all* poor people against poverty. This perspective relies on a narrow understanding of class as about nothing but income, as though working class people do not understand themselves through race and gender: as working class *white men*, for example.

The perspective that ultimately won out was that the struggle against Indigenous poverty and homelessness has to be named and led by Indigenous people, and that the struggle against women’s poverty and homelessness must be named and led by women, but that these forms of poverty and homelessness are not side issues: they have to be made core issues of the poor peoples’ movement overall.

Flora, a delegate from Vancouver, who is a member of Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), argued against a white-man centred vision for a poor people’s movement:

It is important to think about the issues women face in spaces where there are lots of men, and that Indigenous people face in colonial spaces. We live in masculine and colonized spaces. But the wealth that makes those spaces comes from the theft of Indigenous peoples lands and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Canada exists because of the destruction of Indigenous peoples' culture. When we share spaces together, if we only talk in ways that centre white men then dynamics that affect women and Indigenous people are missed. When Indigenous people organize on our own, we create space for women to organize outside of the white men's world.

Everything in society is about white people and males. If women and Indigenous people can't talk among themselves then their issues will never have space.

Giving distinct space for Indigenous people and women is not segregation or special treatment because everything in the shared spaces is always about white people and males.

What we are doing right now is a model of what we should do. We just gave people space to discuss women's issues and Indigenous issues, and then we came back together to discuss it all in the larger group. We couldn't have had that discussion in this larger group if we didn't talk in our smaller group first. Many people who are non-Indigenous would never understand what Indigenous people, including women, have gone through. We need to get our selves back.

... AND LOOKING AHEAD

The gathering ended with unanimous agreement on the next steps needed to build a poor people's movement.

First, to build a movement that is less tied to tent cities as the central sites of struggle. As Ivan Drury argues in the introductory essay in this book, the legal tide has turned against tent cities, and, in Nanaimo, Saanich, and Maple Ridge, judges have ordered the dismantling of camps without asking anything

of the government bodies that applied for injunctions.

To build a poor people's movement demands more tactical flexibility, to organize in the conditions imposed on our communities by capital and the state. This terrain includes tent cities, where possible, but also includes fighting evictions, legally and through direct action refusals to be evicted; squatting buildings with open, public squats and also with covert actions that identify, break open, and prepare empty buildings for an underground squat network; and actions to protest and fight against the growing criminalization of the poor and homeless.

This new orientation requires a change in the political identity of the poor peoples' movement, and also a change in its organizational form.

Rather than identify itself on a local level, with the homeless people of one community or another as the actors, this movement must develop an international consciousness that understands homeless people in Canada as part of an international group that includes refugees and migrants displaced by climate catastrophe and the imperialist, global division and exercise of wealth and power. The slogan for this new political identity is: homeless people and refugees unite!

The organizational form of the militant tent city movement has been ad hoc tent city councils. These ad hoc forms have been dependent on the more formally organized Alliance Against Displacement as facilitators and political organizers of the ad hoc tent city councils. These ad hoc organizations were relevant to tent cities as unique spaces of struggle because tent cities get their political strength and relevance from their hybrid character, as both organic survival spaces for subaltern people shut out from housing and the mainstream infrastructure of Canada's civil society, and as spaces of emergent political resistance. In these spaces, leaders of tent city movements were thrust into situations that challenged the limits of their local, experiential consciousness, pressing them to think and act more politically.

Developing from the ad hoc, politicized survival space of the tent city, joining the inchoate global poor people's movement presents a new challenge to these organic community leaders to deepen their political commitments and develop more enduring organizational forms.

The form that emerged from the June 8th gathering of tent city leaders is the June 8th Network: a still-loosely organized group made up of delegates from 8 communities whose leadership has been seasoned by the militant tent city movement of 2014 to 2019.

In the fall of 2019, the June 8th Network is organizing a tour of 26 communities in the Okanagan and Kootenay regions of the interior and eastern British Columbia. This tour will bring solidarity and the lessons of the rich experiences of struggle from the tent city movement, and will gather research from these communities, with a focus on the two target issues identified by the June 8th gathering: abolishing the system of "supportive housing," and ending the police and bylaw war on the poor.

Because, as the saying goes, capitalism produces its own gravediggers: the militant tent city movement is growing; poor people are getting organized.

Introduction

Ivan Drury

From tent cities to a poor people's movement

In 2015, after years of struggle against the “Abbotsford Shuffle,” the homeless residents of Dignity Village and Gladys Avenue tent cities won a Charter challenge that set a new status quo in the relationship between homeless people and governments and police in British Columbia. The victory, known as the “Shantz Decision,” established that throughout the province, people who are homeless and do not have reasonable access to shelter, have the right to take overnight shelter on government-owned land. This victory had some positive effects for homeless people, who should no longer be harassed in parks during the night time, but it also limited homeless community struggles in some ways too.

I want to reflect on the successes and limitations of how we've been able to use the legal principles underlying the Shantz Decision of 2015 and the Adamson Decision, where the Court refused a Provincial injunction application to displace Super InTent City from the Victoria Courthouse lawn in 2016, to support tent cities. Considering that in Saanich, Nanaimo, and Maple Ridge, judges have used the Shantz Decision as part of

a rationale to order the breakup of tent cities, we have to admit that the era of relying on this Decision may be over. I want to suggest that we make a turn in our tent cities movement, away from relying on big, sustained tent cities as the central tactic of our struggle, and towards a more community and tactically diverse poor people's movement.

COMPETING RESPONSES TO THE SHANTZ DECISION

Governments reacted to the Shantz Decision by trying to limit and curtail its effects. Municipal governments throughout BC responded to the Shantz Decision by passing bylaws that named specific parks where they allow homeless people to stay overnight, between 7pm and 9am as mandated by the Decision. They hired more bylaw officers and strengthened anti-homeless bylaws that empowered these officers, backed up by police and equipped with the hands of city workers, to destroy any camp that lingered beyond these nighttime hours or which were set up in unpermitted locations. These bylaws are technically legal within the Shantz Decision, but do not honour the spirit that underlies it -- that people made homeless by government action and inaction should not be criminalized. Their efforts to survive should not be sabotaged and made more difficult by those same governments.

Our communities reacted to the Shantz Decision in the other direction. We tried to use the legal principles underlying it to go further and increase homeless people's power. We successfully used underlying elements of this decision to defend Super InTent City in Victoria, and Supreme Court Justice Hinkson leaned on and expanded this precedent when he told the Province he would only allow them a displacement injunction if they provided housing. Not shelter, housing.

If the Section 7 Charter claim to "security of the person" applies to homeless individuals taking shelter in a park overnight, we said, then it must also apply to homeless people taking ongoing shelter as a group in a park, or an unused plot of publicly-

owned land. The Shantz Decision did not cover this larger claim – the right to create and live in tent cities – but question was compelling enough that police and governments hesitated to break up camps when they started. Instead, they filed injunction applications with the Supreme Court to ask a judge to decide where the “balance of convenience” fell: is it more in the public good for homeless people to find protection of their lives and property in a tent city, or is it more in the public good to not have tent cities?

CHARTER QUESTIONS HAVE PROTECTED TENT CITIES

For most of the four years since the Shantz Decision, judges have leaned in favour of tent cities. In Super InTent City in Victoria, 10 Year Tent City in Vancouver, and Anita Place Tent City in Maple Ridge, governments brought forward applications for injunctions to displace homeless people out of their collective homes on publicly owned lands, and judges said no, or only said yes with the condition that governments house everyone in the camp rather than displace them to nowhere. When judges refused government injunction applications in these cases, it made other governments and police more unsure about whether tent cities might be protected by the Charter and they were more hesitant to break up camps on trespassing or other criminal charges. Our communities were able to keep Anita Place going for two years, and to start camps in Nanaimo and Saanich.

THE SHANTZ DECISION IS NOW BEING USED AGAINST US

But in the summer of 2018, the courts flipped. Maybe it was because governments developed “fire danger” as a legal attack and lined up willing fire chiefs to testify that tent cities actually were dangerous for homeless people and not a sanctuary at all. On May 24th a homeless woman in Surrey died in a fire in a shed that she was camping in alone. Horrifically, someone

locked the door of the shed from the outside and lit the shed on fire, murdering the woman trapped inside. There was another person living on the same property who was burnt in the fire, but media didn't mention that. Not only does this incident show that fire danger outside organized camps is a greater risk to homeless people's lives, it also repeats what all people in tent cities say all the time: there is safety in numbers, and homeless people -- particularly homeless women -- live under great risk of violence and violent death when they are forced into isolation and hiding. Camp lawyers made all these arguments in court, but each judge placed tremendous faith in the word of Fire Chiefs, who proved to be powerful legal tools for anti-homeless forces in city halls.

Or maybe the courts flipped on us because of the change of the guard in the legislature. With the "we don't build social housing" BC Liberals in office, judges in Victoria and Vancouver awarded governments displacement injunctions with the condition that they build housing. Those judges seemed comfortable governing from the bench, using their legal power to pressure legislators to serve the poor. But in the fall of 2017 the BC NDP took office and there was a major change in the posture of judges. In the injunction proceedings in Saanich, Nanaimo, and Maple Ridge, the judges refused to tell the government what to do. They even said that the Shantz Decision -- camping night by night in parks -- is an adequate remedy to the pains of homelessness. Judges are now using the Shantz Decision against us.

SUSTAINED TENT CITIES MAY BE A THING OF THE PAST

The big change in the tent city movement is that we can no longer expect that the courts are going to side with us. We have to consider the possibility that governments and police will no longer feel uncertain about whether the Charter protects people to claim tent cities. Although the question is still legally unclear, they may use the three displacement decisions in Saanich, Nanaimo, and Maple Ridge as reason enough to act to break

up tent cities before they can get established, using trespass or other criminal code laws rather than going to court to get a judge's order. We have to consider the possibility that long-term, sustained camps might be a thing of the past.

WHY GOVERNMENTS WANT TO BREAK UP TENT CITIES

First, let's consider why governments don't want to allow tent cities to exist. It is not because they want to end homelessness. Breaking up tent cities does not end homelessness, and it is also becoming clear that warehousing homeless people in repurposed mining camp trailers branded "modular housing" modifies but does not end their homelessness. As Maple Ridge Mayor Mike Morden said in the public relations video he posted on YouTube, his goal in attacking Anita Place tent city was to break up the unity of homeless people, political activists, and drug dealers. When the police took over Anita Place, Camp Namegans, and Discontent City, their first focus was to stop activists from getting into camp and organize meetings. In order to have a meeting in the Goldstream Campground where Camp Namegans was contained after a running battle where police chased campers from one property to another, an activist supporter of Namegans snuck across police lines in the trunk of a social worker's car. Governments don't want tent cities to exist because they want to stop low-income people's political organizing. They want to break up our unities and strangle our collective power.

The most important thing for our movement, then, is to stay organized. Although tent cities do make it easier to organize by giving us a stable, unified place that brings together low-income people, they also have had a couple of downsides. They are hard to keep going and require a lot of energy and work just to maintain the space. We have poured thousands of hours into camp maintenance, dealing with fire dangers and hoarders and floods and fires and snow storms. That level of work has a political cost. We have started to mistake the tent city itself for

the movement, and we have been politically isolated fighting for the camp rather than for all the people who are homeless and on the edge of homelessness. To re-organize in a new situation without a stable, long term camp first requires re-thinking who homeless people are socially, and what our organizing means, and then deciding on strategies and tactics about how to build our power.

PROPOSAL ONE: REDEFINE HOMELESSNESS

The most common way of defining homelessness is to say homeless people are unique. Cops deal with homeless people through repression and violence that focuses on the behaviours of someone's homelessness. They treat being visible on a sidewalk with a shopping cart or sleeping in a park as illegal. Bigot politicians and anti-homeless vigilantes also blame homelessness on the fault of individuals who are addicted to drugs or morally faulted. That's clear. But progressives and social worker types also do a similar thing, with a more subtle technique. They treat homeless people through a pathological lens, as a distinct social group of people who have something wrong with them and needs addictions treatments and mental health supports. This idea comes from the "progressive era" politics of the 1920s that wants the government and the middle class to act as a tool of social uplift for the poor.

We should not see homeless people as part of a unique social group. We should see homelessness as a condition imposed on all Indigenous and working class people. These are international groups, not just something local. If we can define homelessness as a punishment against all working class and Indigenous peoples then suddenly we can see a massive network of possible alliances.

There have never been more refugees around the world than there are today as the crisis of mass displacement and death on the Mediterranean ocean continues and Trump campaigns to build a massive wall to stop poor Latin Americans from entering the United States. In Jordan, at a Palestinian refugee

camp that has existed since 1967, every 5 years the government and military comes in and bulldozes the whole thing to prevent them from building their own sustained economy. Governments in Canada are responding to a crisis of internally displaced, homeless people in the same way that the UN and powerful countries in Europe and North America are responding to the crisis of internationally displaced homeless people -- with intense policing, criminalization, regulation, and social and legal exclusions.

Rather than treat homeless people as a unique and isolated group, defining homelessness as a condition that affects all Indigenous and working class people will change who our struggles include as well as our demands. For example, some expanded demands could include: "Prevent homelessness, stop all evictions!" "Healthy homes for all!" "Stop child apprehensions: defend Indigenous homes and families!" "Open the borders, close the jails!"

Feminist organizing at its best has treated violence against any single woman as act of violence against women as a social group – if it's possible against one woman, it's violence against all. We should see homelessness similarly, as violence against the whole of the working class and, even more so, against Indigenous peoples. The fear that many housed people experience about the rise of homelessness in their communities is a recognition of the fact that they too are vulnerable. But they misidentify the cause. It is absurd to suggest that being near a homeless person will infect them with homelessness, but that's how they act. By treating homelessness as a colonial and class condition we insist that we all benefit when we fight and end the condition of homelessness, displacement, and poverty.

PROPOSAL 2: ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE

To stay organized without a tent city - particularly for people who are homeless - is a challenge. Homelessness scatters and disorganizes people, pushes them into chaos, and wrecks the chances of planning beyond the very next moments of survival.

That's all the more reason why building persistent and consistent groups is so necessary.

The June 8th tent city gathering is made up of delegates from struggles in 8 different communities throughout southern BC. We propose that we declare this group a delegate network that meets in person every 3 months, once a season, with two delegates from each community, in order to discuss and analyze our struggles together, and plan support for each other.

In between these seasonal gatherings, the members of the June 8th Network would be responsible for organizing meetings and actions in each community. How each community organizes itself depends on community dynamics and capacities, but an accessible model might be to use the organizational forms we used in tent cities - with a Community Council of elected leaders that meets more often and a monthly gathering of the whole community, over a meal and with a prepared agenda of the most pressing issues of the moment.

PROPOSAL 3: BUILD OUR NETWORK

Without a single, long-term tent city to defend as the point of our organizing, it will free us up to do more defence organizing in different communities. The first step could be to reach out, meet, and plan with people who are not already in the room.

We propose that we organize a BC-wide intercommunal tour in the early fall where delegates from the 8 founding communities of the June 8th Network go on a tour to meet and organize meetings with people in communities throughout BC. We could visit each town with the plan to spend 2 to 3 days in the community, organizing meetings on the spot with poor peoples' Indigenous and working class communities, identifying issues, and holding discussions. This tour could include a broad loop that goes up through the Okanagan to Prince George and even out towards Prince Rupert and back.

BUILDING A POOR PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

Through four years of the tent city movement, we have gained a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge. The challenge now is to learn from those experiences, adapt to the new kinds of attacks we're facing, and build off our strengths. Pivoting from our defensive tent city focused struggles to a more mobile, diverse, expansive poor people's movement does not mean giving up our local struggles or abandoning camps -- it means calling on tent city leaders to grow, break out of our local communities, and accept that we are not weak, we are the global majority. We will continue to fight and we will win!

Part 1: Experiences

Tent Cities Unite!

Reflections from homeless activists across southwest BC

In preparation of this gathering, we held meetings with activists and community members with tent city experiences in Vancouver, Abbotsford, Surrey, Nanaimo, Maple Ridge, and Victoria. In our discussions, we focused on two areas: internal relations within tent cities, and external relations.

Internal relations included how tent cities were organized, how people got along with one another, how conflict and violence was managed, relationships with drug dealers, and the experiences of women and Indigenous people. External relations included tent cities' relationships with bylaw officers, cops, lawyers, supporters, and the "general public."

While each site had its own stories, a few common themes stood out. Internally, all sites acknowledged the need for some kind of organization, rules, and regular meeting attendance. Cleanliness and fire safety also came up as concerns that when addressed, make camps cleaner and nicer to live in and help them stay open in the face of attacks by the government. Internal dynamics can

be challenging when people don't respect rules and don't show up to meetings or contribute to running tent cities, but they can also be exacerbated by external stressors, like arson attacks or police pressure. There were no easy answers to the question of maintaining internal dynamics, but activists across all sites agreed that people who stay in tent cities should be expected to contribute to them by attending meetings and helping to keep the site clean and orderly. Particularly difficult questions are around how to deal with violence and conflict within tent cities, and how to work with and respond to drug dealing. The reality is that people living in tent cities are under immense pressure and often strain just to have their basic needs met—this doesn't always bring out the best in people. Trying to create the world we want to live in, while also carrying trauma and habits from the world in all its current violence, is a persistent challenge.

In general, people find that living in a tent city protects them from the worst of police and bylaw harassment. Once a tent city is established publicly, bylaw cannot go in and steal people's belongings without a court injunction. Lawyers are essential in making the legal claim that displacing tent cities is a Charter violation of homeless people's rights, but in the past year, we've come up against the limitations of a legal avenue, as courts have sided with municipalities against Namegans Nation, Anita Place, and Discontent City. There was agreement that tent cities should do their best to maintain good relations with neighbours and the public, but at the same time, many tent cities are in towns and cities that are incredibly hostile to homeless and poor people. Balancing trying to take on a public relations, damage control approach with standing up for what's right takes a lot of ongoing discussion.

All tent cities face challenges on both internal and external fronts, and they interact with one another: the more unified tent cities feel and are internally, the better able they are to push back against external attacks. Every tent city goes through periods that feel harder or easier, and struggles to generate

creative solutions to their issues. As homeless people continue to organize all over BC, learning from each other's experiences will be crucial so that activists aren't remaking the wheel every time they take action!

Maple Ridge

Anita Place Tent City: Organize or die

Anita Place Tent City is the longest-standing organized tent city in BC. It started in May of 2017 and is still standing – although the City of Maple Ridge won a court injunction that it has used to close the site to all visitors and most of the people who once lived there. Currently, less than ten residents are allowed to remain, and the site is patrolled 24/7 by security guards. With the camp closed, it has been difficult to get meetings together, but the Anita Place community feels strongly that staying organized after tent city is crucial.

At a two-year anniversary meeting, everyone agreed that we need to keep organizing in order to carry on the fight that Anita Place Tent City started. While the camp forced the Province to begin building modular housing in Maple Ridge, that modular housing is going to be supportive and institutionalized, which is not what most people need or want. With the camp closed, Maple Ridge lost its only overdose prevention site. And the broader climate of anti-poor, anti-drug user hatred continues

to rage on. These are struggles that we can keep fighting with or without a tent city.

This past week, we set up an unsanctioned OPS on provincial land that the police and Province immediately moved to take down. It was an important action because it will push on the Province to provide an OPS, and also, because it shows Maple Ridge that breaking a tent city is not enough to break the rebellious spirit of our community. Earlier in the month, we decided that what we need is to start a community council to coordinate ongoing actions and meetings, and to hold monthly all-community gatherings. Even though it's tougher to get meetings together because people are more scattered, there is an excitement and hunger for action. A lot of people want to start another tent city. Whether or not that happens, it seems like being part of Anita Place has shown people how much can be changed through collective action, and in some ways, there's no turning back from that transformative experience.

Although Anita Place was always fighting for affordable housing for everyone – not just people living in the camp at any one moment – it was hard to push forward that broader message, because the camp itself was geographically isolated. In some ways, the camp shutting down is an opportunity to organize actions that disrupt the idea that homeless people are an exceptional group. For example, the message we sent when we started the unsanctioned OPS is that it's there for any drug user who needs it – not just homeless people. The broader message that needs to get out there is that individuals who are currently homeless are part of working class and Indigenous communities, which means that their leadership and initiatives are for working class and Indigenous people more broadly.

Saanich and Victoria

Camp Namegans: Distributed leadership in the camp & beyond

Camp Namegans existed in Saanich, a suburb of Victoria, throughout the summer of 2018. It emerged out of a longer standing “pop-up prayer vigil” that was operated by Chrissy Brett, who set up tents and held spaces for homeless people to gather in Saanich and Victoria parks and green spaces since the winter. When Chrissy discovered that the site she set up on was mixed ownership, including Provincially owned, she decided to stay and maintain a longer term tent city. She was quickly joined by a growing homeless group that claimed the green space beside the highway in Saanich as their sanctuary and home.

In an article in *The Volcano*, Chrissy explained that Camp Namegans sought to use, not claim ownership to the land, to provide a home for Indigenous people who are displaced from their dispossessed ancestral territories. Chrissy said, “I was taken in the 60s scoop and I have Anishinaabe, Cree, Mohawk teachings. Do they expect me to go back to those territories to practice my culture? Where do we practice our culture and ceremonies when 50% of Indigenous people live off reserve?”

Like all tent cities Brett's camp is a sanctuary for homeless people from the pressures of poverty and police harassment, but because of her claim to anti-colonial, spiritual sanctuary, this particular camp also raises a challenge to a Canadian colonial project that has internally displaced Indigenous people and dispossessed them of their direct family and national connections as well as of their lands.

Camp Namegans's Indigenous leadership took on a different form than other tent city leadership structures. Like other camps, Namegans had a leadership council but Chrissy calls it a "distributed" style of appointment that depends more on a central leader. That single leader plays more of a role in selecting the representatives from each "pod," or sub-community of the camp to sit on the council. That's the "distributed" part. The leadership council should draw members from the sub-communities that naturally exist in the street community, and the central leader should be sure that each pod in the camp has a delegate at the leadership table to be sure the needs of that particular community are met and their views represented.

The council itself, once formed, took responsibility for addressing internal issues like theft or violence. Namegans used a system to hold people accountable, with 3-strikes you're out. Because many homeless people have been institutionalized and do not already have the skills to run a system like that, the central leader must be able to train, mentor, and role model within the council. But that is not to say a leadership group should impose unfamiliar or too-formal ways of making decisions or doing things. Street communities have natural ways of governing and organizing themselves and the Namegan model of distributed leadership uses street skills and cred to address issues.

Camp Namegans also learned that non-resident supporters are also part of the camp and need to be accountable to the camp decision-making structure. Namegans had some "boundary" issues with a supporter who used intimacy, personal connections, and their access to resources to exercise undue influence in

camp. Supporters have a position of power (having access to resources, being available to help the camp, doing favors and special treatments, sleeping at the camp and getting intimate with campers, lending their car) that puts camp residents and leaders in a difficult position because saying no to this person means cutting away support. This is not an issue isolated to Namegans because tent cities can attract people with savior complexes and boundary issues. This lesson from Namegans is that supporters should be beholden to the political and decision-making structures of the tent city and not be allowed to carry out their support on their own terms alone.

Surrey

Surrey Strip: The police care about homeless people's obedience, not homeless people's lives

The 135A Street “Surrey Strip,” on unceded Kwantlen, Katzie, Qayqayt, and Kwikwetlem territories, was home to hundreds of homeless people from 2015-2018. Some residents referred to the Strip as a tent city, while others called it an “outdoor prison” because of the intense harassment and surveillance they faced from the so-called “Surrey Outreach Team” – a team of 12 police and four bylaw officers, established in December 2016 to patrol the Strip 24/7. In June 2018, the City of Surrey erected 160 Atco trailer rooms and cleared the Surrey Strip of tents. Some residents were moved into the modular housing, others into shelters, and the rest were scattered across Surrey.

BYLAW HARASSMENT AND THEFT

Bylaw officers were a consistent presence on the Surrey Strip, harassing residents and stealing their belongings. Residents organized a march against bylaw theft in October 2016. There was interest among residents to continue organizing to push the City of Surrey to reimburse homeless people for their stolen belongings, but the arrest of a lead organizer in early

2017 broke the momentum. Residents found ad hoc ways to mitigate bylaw theft, like “babysitting” each other’s tents and keeping their sites clean. While the Strip existed, bylaw would tell people camping elsewhere in Surrey to move to the Strip. Since the Strip has been dismantled, there is increased bylaw presence and harassment in surrounding areas, and people are less equipped to defend themselves and each other.

POLICE REPRESSION

According to those at the meeting, the police presence on the Strip made little difference in their day-to-day lives: “They didn’t change anything. Things still went on the same down on the Strip.” However, when Strip residents became serious about organizing, they faced immediate repression from police. Police tried to attend organizing meetings, but residents responded: “Get out of here! You’re not welcome here. You don’t live here – this is for Strip people only.” Residents started talking about forming a council and holding weekly meetings; just one week later, a lead organizer was arrested. She says that the arrest was politically motivated: “I was getting too organized.” After the arrest, efforts to organize the Strip stalled.

VIOLENCE ON THE STRIP

At the meeting, people referred to the violence of the “younger generation” several times: “In the old days, you used your fists. Now they use weapons: guns, knives, bear spray. Everyone is so frustrated all the time because they are getting harassed by bylaw and cops. Anger builds up.” At the same time, they expressed feeling safe on the Strip as women: “We know all the weirdos.” One woman said, “Safe on the Strip? I don’t feel safe anywhere. But when the cops weren’t there I felt a hell of a lot safer.” She explained that when police are violent towards women, they get away with it.

ORGANIZING RESIDENTS

Everyone agreed that, with a few exceptions, Strip residents were not organized: “Nothing was planned down on the

Strip; everything was day-by-day.” The fact that there was no democratic structure on the Strip meant that attempts to organize were precarious and leaders were vulnerable to repression. The woman who had been trying to get the Strip organized said she felt frustrated. “Once I went to jail, nobody took over for me. Everything I was trying to do got forgotten,” she said. “I was starting to organize a lot against bylaw and the things they stole before I went to jail.”

ORGANIC COMMUNITY SUPPORT

“It became a community of support.” People from the Strip – not the cops, bylaw, fire, or ambulance – responded to overdoses and saved each other’s lives. They woke each other up in the morning: “Even if they hated me for it, they preferred me waking them up than bylaw.” They defended each other from harassment and theft. The loss of the Strip has meant the loss of this community: “We’re struggling harder now because we don’t have that support. When we were all in one area, we could go to our friends. We took care of each other.”

INSTITUTIONAL HOUSING

Everyone at the meeting agreed that the modulars broke up the homeless community and the potential for homeless community organizing in Whalley. According to those at the meeting, living in the modulars impacts people’s consciousness: “Most people in the mods forget about the community and solidarity we had on the Strip. They think, what do I care about them? People complain – not because they didn’t get dinner but because someone who doesn’t live there got dinner before they did.”

Nanaimo

Discontent City: Mob violence & government control

Discontent City was established on May 17th, 2018 on unceded Snuneymuxw Nation territory, on an unoccupied lot in downtown Nanaimo. The camp existed for nearly November when it was evicted following the loss of a court injunction and the opening of two temporary supportive housing buildings by BC housing. There were 157 units of this housing available, but that only held half of the residents of Discontent city, whose numbers had grown to 300 residents. Discontent City was just one of a major movement of autonomous, politicized tent cities in BC, but there were a few things that made it unique.

WHITE SUPREMACIST AND VIGILANTE VIOLENCE

The camp right away had a big impact on how society as a whole in Nanaimo is organized. Just as the police tried to reassert their violent power, and attempt to continue to torture homeless people in the camp like they did on the street, the public got the same idea. They would gather on the top of the parkade across from the camp and hurl bottles and rocks,

or shine lasers, take pictures or yell at people to regain their power to humiliate people who were living in the camp. This tension with the public existed long before Discontent city, but what the camp made visible was the regular exercise of violence used against homeless people in every day life, but it also made it harder for police and vigilantes to enact that violence. The Soldiers of Odin (a white supremacist group) organized two major demonstrations to try and break up the camp. Each time, we organized 300 people to come stand at the camp gates to defend it from these bigots and the residents of Nanaimo who supported them. Although we were successful both times in our defence of the camp, the constant and overwhelming threat of vigilante violence that Discontent city residents faced increased the overall anxiety of the camp itself.

SIZE AND LOCATION OF DISCONTENT CITY

At its biggest, Discontent city was home to 300-350 residents, making it the largest tent city in BC. External forces like police and vigilantes were always present, but so were the internal tensions of the camp, which came out of residents' trauma, poverty and displacement and were amplified by these external pressures. We tried to manage that tension the best we could by having regular camp meetings, and an elected residents council to manage the day to day of the camp, getting rid of people who were stealing or violent, and having a set of ground rules that residents had to follow. The sheer size of the camp made those already difficult dynamics harder to resolve. The majority of Nanaimo's homeless population lived at Discontent city, and it was located right downtown. There was nowhere else for people to gather, so even if you got kicked out of tent city, or weren't living there in the first place, everyone else did so you were a part of that community regardless if you lived there or not. 300 people may have lived there, but there was at least another 100 who would access resources there every day.

YOUTH IN THE CAMP

One of the ground rules at Discontent City was that there was no minors allowed. This rule was created out of fear that the police would use a minor being in the camp as an excuse to raid people's tents, and the media and court would use it as a method to further demonize homeless people. This was difficult to regulate, because the truth is, there are youth on the street and a severe lack of resources for them. The camp was safer than the bush or an alley, and the Ministry felt the same way. Social workers would often bring minors to the camp when they didn't know what else to do, but if the police would come in, they would have to sneak off the property or stay out of sight. There is a big contradiction between what the dominant city rules are, and what norms are in street communities. These minors were part of the street community and had street families to care for them long before tent city came along, so why should we have to exclude them from possibly the only safe place for them? No minor was actually ever removed from camp, but it was used against us in the court injunction case.

ABOLISH SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

One of the reasons we started Discontent City was that the City of Nanaimo refused Provincial money to open a supportive housing building. There is a major problem with anti-homeless, anti-poor, anti-Indigenous, and anti-woman hatred in Nanaimo. It was a big success that the camp won more than 160 units of housing, but this victory is heavily dampened by the problems with that housing. Unlike modular housing in parts of Vancouver, the modular housing in Nanaimo is made out of repurposed, second-hand mining camp trailers that are tiny, with paper thin walls, and already falling apart. Many rooms don't even have doors that lock. The government has not plan to replace this housing with decent, permanent social housing, so we're stuck in it. To make matters worse, this housing is run like jails or institutions. One of the projects is surrounded with a massive fence and a gate that is staffed 24 hours a day with security guards and we're not allowed any guests. People who

came to the Discontent City anniversary meeting guess that every single person in this housing would leave in a minute if another tent city started.

Abbotsford

Dignity Village: Without rules we lose everything

Dignity Village started in the spring of 2013. When the City of Abbotsford responded by dumping a heap of chicken shit at a camp on Gladys Ave, homeless people and advocates organized a tent city at Jubilee Park. When the city got a court injunction to displace the camp, it moved yet again to Gladys Ave. Not long after that, homeless people in Abbotsford took the city to court, arguing that it's a Charter violation for homeless people to be barred from setting up tents anywhere in public – and they won. The Shantz decision established that homeless people have the right to set up tents in public parks, but only night by night – meaning they have to be taken down every morning.

When I set up on Gladys Avenue and other joined me, at first the police were pushy when they came there, demanding that we should go. Sometimes they would come in the night and bang on the tents like it's a wall...When the court case was done, that's when we all got moved. Generally, the police were pushy at first, then they were more laid back, once they realized there was nothing they could do.

In Abbotsford, people often camp in groups, but it takes a tent city to actually protect people from cop and bylaw harassment. At first, cops harassed Dignity Village, but as the camp remained, they eventually backed off. Like other sites, police serve as the first line of attack against tent cities, particularly in their beginning stages. If a tent city can hold its ground, then police back off and leave municipalities to go through the courts to get injunctions to displace tent cities.

If the public wasn't afraid because of the media, because it's the media that criminalizes us and make us out to be bad people so that people fear us; so if the media would come on board and tell stories, it might slow down the public distrust or hate or violence or whatever; because the police are going to enforce the majority feelings but if you sway opinion or gain compassion you can make waves of movement that way.

Anti-homeless bigotry is intense in the Fraser Valley. People have had arson attacks on camps, things thrown at them, shots taken at them. Part of the narrative is that homeless people, and tent cities in particular, become centres of crime and drug use. This narrative relies on the criminalization of drug use, showing that tent cities are well-suited to take a stance against the drug war. Part of defending a tent city is putting out an alternative narrative, one that insists that drug users and poor people are entitled to safety in public, secure housing, and freedom from police harassment.

We learned from our mistakes that you need some kind of organization, you need a contractual agreement between the people when they come in, you need to form a committee; before that you need to form some structures... You have to have something that is organized that will help each person get through that because we experienced many people in the camp and fires, but we had no organization, we need committees to be formed ahead of time so that when we set up, we have a committee to help run it and we have agreements about garbage, how much stuff you can accumulate.

A chief lesson learned from Dignity Village is the need to have organization and rules. Dealing with fire safety and camp clean-up are huge tasks that everyone should be contributing to and on the same page with. Keeping a neat and orderly looking tent city does a lot for the tent city's image to the public—it's easier to argue that they are life-saving, necessary spaces when they look well taken care of.

Victoria

Super InTent Society Victory over PHS Supportive Housing

Super InTent City was closed by a court injunction won by the Province of British Columbia in the summer of 2017. But even that defeat was a victory because the judge said that if the Province wanted to move the hundred or so people off the Victoria Courthouse lawn, they would have to first provide homes – not shelters – for the residents of the camp. This camp won hundreds of units of housing. But the housing we won was “supportive” housing – and when we agreed to move into it we did not realize how institutional it would be.

Super InTent City met with the housing operator, PHS Community Services, before the camp was taken down. They had their staff come over from Vancouver and sit with us. They promised us we would have tenancy rights, that we could continue to run our meetings and operate our Council, and that we could continue to do community overdose response work in the Johnson Street building. It was all lies.

When we moved into Johnson Street, we were not allowed

to have guests, we were blocked from meeting in or using the common space for a peer-based consumption site, and we were surveilled by cameras in the hallways and staff in our rooms. Our community was under attack.

We filed complaints about the restrictive guest policy in 2017 and the Portland Hotel Society responded by arguing that the 844 Johnson St building was a “housing-based health facility” in an effort to exempt the building from the Act. The Arbitrator from the Residential Tenancy Branch wrote in his July 21, 2017 decision: “When I look at the tenancy agreement together with the circumstances around when the facility was purchased by the Province and created by BC Housing I find that there is no evidence presented to me that the residential property could be considered primarily a health facility. I find that the subject property is a residential property containing rental units, as defined under Section I of the Act which provides access to support and medical services.” The Portland Hotel Society appealed this decision, taking it to the Supreme Court for a Judicial Review. This appeal has been dismissed by Judge Sharma.

Judge Neena Sharma writes in her ruling, “the petitioner (PHS) has not provided any justification of why tenants who are being given a social benefit of below market housing, in an effort to try and stabilize their living situation, ought to be given less legal rights than tenants paying market rates in a residential building operated by a commercial entity.”

Our victory is a victory for all residents living in supportive housing across the province.

We deserve rights under the Residential Tenancy Act and the same standard of living as in any other residential building. We hope that residents in supportive and low-income housing across the province recognize that they have the same rights as any other tenant, and that they can demand those rights.

Vancouver

Vancouver camps and the contest between police and community for control

In Vancouver since 2015 there have been a series of camps: 58 W. Hastings, 10 Year Tent City, Sugar Mountain Tent City, and now Oppenheimer Park. Other than Oppenheimer, these tent cities were run by the residents of the camp themselves and were part of a fight for housing justice. But Oppenheimer started slowly, as tents popped up and stayed up, and before residents could organize, city bylaw, police, and city staff exercised control by organizing the regular takedown and re-set-up of the camp. The lesson from the Vancouver experience is that who controls the gate to a camp controls the camp.

The formula the police have been using at Oppenheimer is that on Wednesdays everyone has to pack up everything and move out so the parks staff can clean up the whole park. But once the weather improved, the police started coming through every day and seizing tents that are not occupied. That means that people who live in tents in the park either have to pack up and carry all their belongings with them all day or sit with their tent all day to make sure police and bylaw don't trash it.

One man who lives at Oppenheimer explained, "I see it all the time. Last week a friend of mine got up out of his tent and told the cops he was going to the washroom, not abandoning his tent. He went to the washroom and they didn't even wait until he was out of their line of vision. They stuck their pitchforks right through the side of his brand new tent, heaved it up and chucked it in their garbage truck. That's what the city staff are using now, pitchforks. They don't want to touch your stuff, they destroy it."

Al, who was involved in supporting 58 W. Hastings and 10 Year Tent City, said that police control over the camps is not the only problem. "We set up these tent cities and stuff, we set up our own security. I've seen it time and time again," he said. "Things are going good, then the dealing picks up and more and more people come through and the bike parts start piling up, it gets dirty and disorganized, and it falls apart. When we lose control over the gate we lose control over the camp."

The Vancouver experience points to a double problem: community self-control over the tent city is a huge challenge all on its own because homeless communities are traumatized and disorganized, and they also are undermined and attacked by police and social workers who want to take them over. The way this control is finally worked out is over the question of who controls the gate and the access to the camp.

If police control the gate then it is a police camp. In a police camp the tents in the camp are only there with the permission of the police. And the security of people and their belongings inside their tents is decided by police. If the cops want you to go you have to go. If the cops are going to let you stay then you can stay.

If the community itself controls the gate then the community itself controls the camp -- for better or worse. The chaos comes not from the people who live in the camp, but from outside. A camp is not only a place to live, it is also a place that low-income

people can be and hang out and socialize. It is an attractive place for people in the broader community and some of them just want to party. So even winning community control over the camp is not a finished victory, it's the beginning of a new challenge.

Fostering good leadership is part of managing this problem. Exercising good organized control over access to the camp is part of that. In the tent cities at 58 W. Hastings, 10 Year tent city, and Sugar Mountain, the residents elected leadership councils that were -- at first -- entirely made up of women. These leadership councils helped steward a safer, community controlled camp. But when the police forced the camp to open a second gate, the leadership council lost control over the access to the camp and it started to fall apart. Community control over a camp makes it a space of resistance, but the challenge is to keep organized control over the gate -- against all challengers -- or risk losing the camp.

Tri Cities

We Exist Tent City Founding Declaration

Editor's note: Homeless communities from the Tri-Cities are attending the 2019 tent cities gathering with lots of experience of homelessness – and of what we're calling the "Tri-Cities Model" of managing homelessness through constant harassment and disappearance. But they have not yet had an experience of organizing a tent city. One of their goals for this gathering is to learn from the experiences of others in order to launch their own tent city... as soon as possible!

We acknowledge that the residents of We Exist Tent City are seeking shelter and protection on the unceded and occupied core territories of the Kwikwetlem nation, and within the shared territories of the Tsleil-Waututh, Musqueam, Squamish, and Sto':lo nations.

Homeless people exist! Two years after former PoCo Mayor Greg Moore claimed "we don't have any chronically homeless people living on our streets," the 2017 homeless count found 117 homeless people in all of the Tri-Cities. Despite the drastic increase found in the 2017 homeless count, which is itself an underestimate, nothing is being done to address the homelessness crisis in the Tri-Cities. Social workers cannot outreach us into housing that does not exist. RCMP and Bylaw officers have forced us into hiding and made us feel unwelcome in our

own cities. But we are not hiding anymore.

We Exist Tent City is taking unused City-owned land to protect ourselves against the hostility of the government, bylaw and RCMP officers, vigilantes in the public, and the dangers – the cold, isolation, overdose, and bear-attack – of living scattered, alone, and invisible in the bush. The Tricities' "solution" to homelessness is to have bylaw and RCMP officers bully us constantly. Bylaw officers regularly steal all of our belongings, forcing us to constantly start over and pushing us deeper into the bush to camp. RCMP officers threaten us any time we pause in public and tell us to move to other cities, like Maple Ridge or Edmonton. We refuse to spend our lives being pushed from place to place. We Exist Tent City is a place for homeless people not welcome anywhere in the Tri-Cities, a community hub where we can support and care for each other, and a protest site where we homeless activists are fighting for housing justice.

HOMES NOT SHELTERS

We call for the Tri-Cities Councils to declare the City-owned property at 3030 Gordon for social housing, and for BC Housing and the Federal government to build homes here. Homeless shelters manage and maintain homelessness; to end homelessness we need social housing built by governments using tax dollars, with rents fixed at welfare shelter rate and affordable to people on basic pension and with the lowest incomes.

Our community-based "homeless people's registry" has counted 67 people living on the streets in just one part of Coquitlam. There are hundreds of homeless people in the Tri-Cities, and thousands living on the edge of homelessness. We are calling for 200 modular housing homes to be built immediately and for the Province to build 10,000 units of social housing every year throughout BC, including in the Tri-Cities.

TENANT RIGHTS NOT "SUPPORTIVE HOUSING" INSTITUTIONS

We demand more than the basic survival offered to us by shelters and supportive housing: we demand homes. Home is having your own room, your own door you can close and lock. Home is a place where your kids can live or visit you. Home is being able to turn off the lights to sleep and turn up the heat if you're cold or open a window if you're

hot. Home is feeling safe and not having to keep your guard up. It is having a friend over to play cards. "Supportive housing" pathologizes and dehumanizes us. Supportive housing continues to break up Indigenous peoples' families at a time of so-called reconciliation.

SUPPORT WE EXIST TENT CITY

We call on the City and Province to provide us regular services and facilities including health services like harm reduction and on-site counseling, garbage pickup, water, toilets, and access to nutritious food. We are a self-organized community. We don't want or need social workers to manage We Exist Tent City or our lives. We need the same municipal support that all Tri-Cities residents expect and receive.

Part 2: Founding documents

2016

Four Principles for a Tent City Movement

Drafted by a convergence of homeless people from across southern BC who converged on Super InTent City Victoria, February 25th, 2016 to defend the camp against threatened displacement by the government of BC

Emerging from a historic gathering called by Super InTent City Victoria in February 2016 is a four-point declaration of principles for a BC-wide anti-displacement and housing justice movement. This is a working document, but it outlines four central principles that will come to define a new period of struggle against homelessness, one where homeless and displaced people, a great and growing floating population, refuse to beg for services they deserve as human beings, refuse to be criminalized and institutionalized as the basic fact of their existence, and begin to take the space they need to survive.

- I. Homes not shelters! We refuse to be hidden away in temporary shelters or scattered with insecure rent subsidies. We need regular, tax-funded, social housing programs to

build, every year, ten thousand units of housing available to people at welfare/pension rate in British Columbia. We don't need service providers to run this housing for us as "supportive," institutionalized rooms. Our social housing must be run as normal apartments, covered by the Residential Tenancy Act. But even social housing is only one part of ending poverty; housing security is impossible without lifting all people out of poverty by guaranteeing a livable income for all, whether by raising welfare and disability rates or implementing a guaranteed income program.

2. Support tent cities! Amidst the violence of homelessness, tent cities are relatively safe and secure places for homeless people because they are self-determined community spaces. If we are displaced and scattered, we are unsafe and vulnerable, but together we are strong. Until homelessness is ended through the combined efforts of every level of government, every municipality must treat tent cities as "permanent," run by tent city resident councils, and left alone to operate on their own terms. Tent city sites must be provided with basic amenities like water and bathrooms, be close to the downtown of cities, near the services, supports, and communities that tent city residents depend on to survive.

3. Smash the new poor laws! End all discriminatory anti-homeless bylaws that legislate limited, night time only hours that homeless people are allowed to set up shelters in public parks. These laws mandate police and security guards to harass and brutalize homeless people and encourage an anti-homeless belief that homeless people are not part of the public. Homeless people are full-fledged members of the public and must be free to enjoy and seek shelter in public spaces as they need it, no matter the time of day.

4. Stop the violation of our human rights! We are discriminated against and treated poorly by staff and

management in shelters and “supportive housing,” and by police and bylaw officers. Because shelters and supportive housing do not fall under the Residential Tenancy Act, the staff have the final say and little recourse, and we suffer the consequences (e.g., banning, red zones, etc.). We need a process for making complaints about human rights violations that is transparent and holds people and organizations accountable. This body needs to include people who are homeless to investigate and address these complaints, and publicize widespread violations.

2018

#SquatTheEmpties! Founding statement of the Schoolhouse Squat

Nanaimo's Schoolhouse Squat opened to resist Court-ordered collective punishment and end homelessness

October 5th, 2018

We acknowledge that the Schoolhouse Squat is on the territory of the Snuneymuxw nation, treated in the 1854 "Douglas" Treaty, which guarantees Snuneymuxw sovereignty over their lands and waters, and which Canada does not honour. The Schoolhouse Squat is not making a claim to title or ownership of the lands under the Rutherford school, we pledge to use the building and lands in a good way.

Today we are opening the Schoolhouse Squat as a home for the hundreds of homeless people displaced by a brutal and unjust displacement order won by the City of Nanaimo from the Supreme Court of British Columbia.

For five months, Discontent City has been a home to the homeless -- in camp we were unhoused, but we made a home. The government and courts are trying to make us homeless

again, and we will not go along with it. It is not right to call the Schoolhouse Squat a protest against the injustice of the court injunction, it is resistance against Canada's collective punishment to homeless people who organize and fight back. We are resisting the death sentence dealt to our most vulnerable homeless friends by Judge Skolrod's order to displace over 300 people to nowhere.

A protest would appeal for the government to help. We know the government is not going to help homeless people. The court-ordered displacement of Discontent City and Camp Namegans in Saanich is proof that the government and the Court wants homeless people to go away and die. We know that these powerful bodies are whipping up an anti-homeless hatred in the public. We have seen the City, Police, and Province stand by silently while a mob of hundreds gathered at our gates to assault us. We have heard the government and law use the same language as the anti-homeless mob: that the homeless are outsiders, that the homeless are dangerous, that the homeless are a threat to public order. The Schoolhouse Squat is resistance, not a protest because to beg for help from those who hate us would be a naive hope that we cannot afford while the government and courts conspire to disorganize us and scatter us into dangerous isolation.

DISPLACEMENT IS A COURT-ORDERED DEATH SENTENCE

The Court's displacement ruling says that night-by-night park camping is good enough for homeless people. The City has offered less than 70 shelter beds to more than 300 camp residents and said we can camp in some parks between the hours of 7pm and 9am. This is not a favour, this is a death sentence.

In preparation for Discontent City's October 12th eviction date, the City of Nanaimo has introduced amendments to Parks and Recreation Bylaws to further criminalize homelessness. These amendments include \$150 fines for activities associated with

homelessness, including: erecting a shelter during the day, having a shopping cart, building any kind of structure, leaving personal belongings, and a number of vague laws that give bylaw officers the power to fine people for pretty much anything, including for “fail to obey person in charge of activity,” for “remain when directed to leave,” and doing “activity contrary to signs” and “activity not designated.” These fines penalize homeless people for existing in the parks where Judge Skolrod has ordered them to go. By enforcing fines people can't pay, homeless people are also at risk of being red-zoned from the area, which will isolate homeless people from their community and resources, until they are pushed back into the woods and shadows to die. We refuse to submit to these anti-homeless, discriminatory bylaws.

The Schoolhouse Squat is resisting the society that wants us to die by using a publicly-owned empty building as the housing we need to save our lives. We are using the Rutherford school that has been abandoned by governments that prioritizes tax cuts for corporations over education for children as housing for the homeless. We stand against corporate tax cuts and government program cuts.

#SQUATTHEEMPTIES!

The Schoolhouse Squat is resisting the government campaign of breaking up our lifesaving community – which is larger than Nanaimo. Homeless people are not only being attacked in Nanaimo; in Saanich, Vancouver, Surrey, Maple Ridge, Vernon, Kamloops, Kelowna, Kitimat, Victoria, Langley, and every other town and city in BC people are sleeping on the cold and wet streets while buildings stand empty. We are calling for homeless people and people facing evictions and people paying more than they can afford to rent to #squattheempties. There are more than 10,000 people homeless in BC and we don't have to be. Let us take empty buildings and use them. Our homes can't wait for politicians.

We are not calling only for currently homeless people to join us.

The only ones who benefit from upholding a unique category of “the homeless” are the social service agencies who compete for funding by showing that they can absorb and control people who are homeless in their programming. Governments, police, social workers, and corporations want to spread the myth that homeless people have something uniquely wrong with them that has to be fixed before they can be housed. This is bullshit. Homeless people are Indigenous; homeless people are working class. There is no class, social, or national difference between people who happen to be homeless today and those who may be homeless tomorrow; this division works only to divide and weaken us.

We want the Schoolhouse Squat to be a gathering place for Indigenous people displaced from their lands and dispossessed of their communities, for working class people who have lost their homes, communities, and families to low wages, high rents, overwork, and abuse, and for people in housing crisis. Come join the Schoolhouse Squat in Nanaimo, crack open a squat in your own town -- you are needed and welcome. We are the people can end homelessness.

OUR PATH TO THE SCHOOLHOUSE SQUAT

For 2 years the Supreme Court has leaned in favour of homeless people's rights against the power of the state to criminalize and displace, implicitly recognizing that the dominant society is causing homelessness and harming homeless people. Those days are over.

On Sept 21st Judge Skolrood granted the displacement injunction to the City of Nanaimo, giving Discontent City 21 Days to disperse. The City of Nanaimo distributed a letter camp residents stating that there would be no immediate action “today or tomorrow” and that the City intended to assist in the successful movement of people out of Tent City into the community. They did not give us contact information such as a phone number, department, email, or any information

whatsoever as to how or where to access this promised assistance. Skolrood's decision in Nanaimo and the earlier decision in Saanich means that the courts have joined the politically bankrupt politicians and hateful anti-homeless property owners in irrationally calling for the expulsion of homeless people from communities. After the Saanich and Nanaimo decisions are any indication, the Courts are no longer a sanctuary from anti-homeless hysteria.

The Schoolhouse Squat is the next stage of struggle against homeless displacement. The alternative is to admit defeat and watch thousands of our people shrink off into the bushes to die.

LAND USE NOT PROPERTY RIGHT

The Schoolhouse Squat is making a radical claim against Canadian property rights. Public property, beginning with the idea of "Crown Land," is a foundation of the colonial process that preceded Canada, dispossessing Indigenous peoples with the Canadian nation-state. Today, dispossessed Indigenous people make up approximately half of the people stuck living on the streets in Nanaimo as consequence of this colonial dispossession. Correcting this injustice and ending Indigenous homelessness is not part of the government's so-called reconciliation.

We are saying that the government's property right is hurting our people, and that using this land and this empty building is a grassroots correction to state-organized project of colonial dispossession.

There are 3 parts to our legal claim to the Schoolhouse Squat:

I. The Schoolhouse Squat is on publicly owned property: Judges have found that governments have an obligation to the public good that private landowners do not. Homeless people have stopped government injunction applications by successfully claiming that public property owners have a

special responsibility to the public good. We are making claim that displacing us from the Schoolhouse Squat would violate our Section 7 Charter Right to security of the person and protection of personal belongings.

2. The Schoolhouse Squat is an empty and unused building: Our use of the Rutherford School as housing is not interrupting or inconveniencing any other use of this public property; we are causing no harm to any other person or community by improving homeless people's access to security of the person and protection of belongings.

3. The Schoolhouse Squat has all the benefits of a tent city and none of the dangers: Although the judges in both Saanich and Nanaimo tent city cases recognized that tent cities make homeless people safer and healthier in many ways, the judges ruled that the long-term use of tents in tent cities make them prone to fire hazards. The Schoolhouse Squat's response to this ruling is to maintain homeless people's access to the Charter right of security of the person and protection of belongings without the fire risks these judges have found inherent to long-term tent camps.

Part 3: Issues

Making space to deal with our shit

We live in a violent world. Colonialism and capitalism are both structures that affect every part of our lives, inflicting trauma and suffering on Indigenous and working class people. The more people are pushed to the margins of society, the more they have to struggle to survive on a day to day basis, and the more dehumanized they feel. When we start tent cities, we are not starting them in some alternate, perfect universe. We start them in the world we currently live in, which means that people inevitably bring their trauma into tent cities spaces. It means that tent cities are not utopias—from the get-go, they are saddled with the violences of broader structures. Learning how to live together, how to collectively address trauma and violence, is part of the work of maintaining a tent city. If tent cities are about creating a better world: one where people aren't valued based on how much property they have, one where communities share their resources and care for one another collectively, then we need to fight to make sure we don't reproduce the very violences we are trying to extinguish.

Homeless people are not a homogenous group: they are composed of Indigenous people and settlers, men and women, straight people and queer people, cis people and trans people, white people and racialized people. But because poor and homeless people are generally so marginalized, the pressures of sticking together to survive and fight back can erase differences. When society's overwhelming message to all homeless people is: you are not human, homeless communities sometimes respond to that with their own counter-message: we are all human, we are all the same regardless of our background. Relying on unity and solidarity to assert humanity is a good thing, but we also have to find ways to value differences and celebrate them.

One way to think about how we understand the different social groups who come together in tent cities is to ask the question: who are we fighting for? A common sentiment amongst homeless activists is that we are fighting for everyone, because most people are a paycheck or two away from homelessness, and those who are visibly homeless and living on the streets are just the tip of the iceberg. We should be fighting for everyone—and fighting for everyone means making sure we understand how different groups might have shared battles (like fighting for affordable housing) as well as battles that are different. For example, women who are poor or homeless experience the same poverty that men do, but they also have to deal with gendered violence. Fighting for women can definitely be part of a broader homeless people's movement, but there are also specific battles against patriarchy and misogyny that require women to take a leading role. Similarly, if Indigenous people can't organize themselves within poor people's movements then they will not be able to decolonize their communities and selves as part of those struggles that the broader movement treats as economic rather than spiritual, cultural, and national.

The reality is that we can have both: a poor people's movement that is unified in its demands, but that also makes room for the struggles of minority groups within the movement. If what

we are fighting for is a new world free of exploitation and oppression, then the struggle to make that world must include fighting against all forms of exploitation and oppression: not just fighting against poverty generally, but fighting against patriarchy and misogyny, fighting against racism and white supremacy, fighting against colonialism and the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples. Fighting against these violences means fighting for the self-determination of Indigenous nations, for the safety and leadership of women, queer and trans people, and for an end to the racial and national oppression of racialized people. Tent cities are spaces where people act out their traumas and fucked up ways of treating other people, but they are also spaces where we can collectively reflect on how we've learned to treat people and create new ways of being and relating.

Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS)

Indigenous homelessness & decolonizing the fight for home

Homelessness has a different meaning for Indigenous people than for non-Natives because home has a different meaning for Indigenous peoples. Members of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) have been involved in Vancouver's tent cities and every week they go to Oppenheimer Park to do outreach with homeless people living under police control there. At a meeting on June 6th, they talked about their experiences with homelessness and housing to identify the specifics of an Indigenous home, and the specific problems of Indigenous homelessness.

"Having a shower, a bed, a door, and shelter," one man explained, is necessary for the beginning of a home. But another disagreed. "If I have a tent where I can keep my things and I can rest and have my family with me, then that's a home," he said. A third chimed in and agreed. "Hearth," he said. "A hearth where I can sit and eat and talk with my family and my people. That's home."

Family, for WAHRS members, does not mean the same thing as it does for Canadians. The Canadian model of family comes from the British imperial norm: a nuclear family that is an enclosed unit with a husband and wife and children. The Indigenous family that WAHRS members valued as central to the Indigenous home is far more expansive and speaks to decolonized forms of social organization that are collective and value the whole community.

An elder man at the front of the room explained: "I'm Cree and Blackfoot and I grew up on the rez. A home for me was aunts, uncles, cousins... in some way or another I was related to these people. My mom being Blackfoot, I had family on the south side of the border who I never met. Home for me is bannock and meat, to gather all the family around. Family I grew up with and family I have not met and my street family are the family that has to be together for me to have a home."

A woman behind him then yelled out. "I live in a room with my homeless grandson and they want to evict me for that. How can that be if my family is my home. I am supposed to choose between keeping my roof over my head and keeping my grandson with me. I am supposed to make him homeless or make myself homeless." If home includes Indigenous family, then by putting her grandson out on the street then she would be losing her home even if she stayed inside.

These experiences show that British Columbia's "supportive housing" model of low-income housing, which only accepts single occupants, does not allow guests or only allows them under strict rules and restrictions, and which are too small to gather in, are part of a colonial attack on the Indigenous family. Asked how many of the 30 Indigenous people in the room live in buildings that restrict guests, about 20 of them put up their hands. The elder man at the front of the room said, "hundreds of years ago they gave us blankets infected with small pox to kill us. Now they are giving us housing to destroy our families."

Safety, according to the Indigenous woman member of WAHRS, who named it as central to home, is freedom from violence. She said a home is “a safe place, where no one can take advantage of me.” Her words raised home as defined by Indigenous women’s bodily integrity and autonomy, where she is safe from violence and where she can choose who she wants to talk to or see and how she wants to treat others and be treated.

Home as Indigenous women’s holistic safety is a striking definition because the same week as the WAHRS discussion on the Indigenous home, the results of Canada’s national inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women were released. This report found that Canada has, and is, carrying out a genocidal war of elimination against Indigenous women. One young man in the WAHRS meeting said, “If you want to kill a people you kill their women. Indigenous women are murdered and missing because Canada wants to eliminate Indians.” His comments cut to the core issue -- Indigenous homelessness is first and foremost about Canada’s theft of land and the genocide against Indigenous peoples in order to take it.

WAHRS also said that the only way to decolonize within the housing struggle is to have spaces for Indigenous people to get together on their own, to organize their own meetings and spaces, to understand the specifics of their struggles, and to be leaders in their -- and the entire -- movement. The experience of operating WAHRS within the home base of the VANDU office space is the positive proof that when Indigenous people have their own organizing spaces they can recover and develop their own perspectives. WAHRS wants to work with and fight for the freedom of other poor people, and having distinct Indigenous spaces to organize, they said, does not change that.

Gina, a member of the WAHRS board, explained her frustration: “We are the first people and we’re going to be the last in everything, including housing.” The housing justice movement tends to talk about housing as an economic problem: how many low-income units exist, how much do they cost, how

many modular units can be built. Of course the price of rent is important, but if the only low-income housing that is built is for singles, in tiny rooms, with no guests, families, or minors allowed, then living in this housing will continue and further institutionalize Indigenous homelessness.

By Listen Chen, published in *The Volcano* (June 28, 2018)

Women in tent cities are fighting back against patriarchy!

Women in tent cities are organizing themselves to band together and fight back against patriarchal violence. The Women's Council in Nanaimo's Discontent City formed in early June, followed quickly by a women's group in Maple Ridge's Anita Place Tent City.

At the first meeting of the Anita Place Women's Group, we gathered to talk about the central struggles of women in the tent city and found that they are not unique. Like women everywhere, women at Anita Place face threats of violence and disrespect from men, including the expectation that women perform reproductive labour. Women encounter patriarchy and misogyny wherever they are, whether it's carried out by boyfriends, cops, or vigilantes.

At our next meeting we discussed the international Wages for Housework campaign of the 1970s, which sought wages for housework – not to make women more money, but rather, to socially validate women's labour and give them the power

to refuse to do that labour by going on strike. We recognized parallel concerns in the struggles of sex workers, who consistently campaign under the slogan “sex work is work!”. We discussed how the devaluing of women’s labour, whether sex work or child rearing, affects a woman’s sense of self confidence and empowerment. Throughout these conversations, one consistent theme was that women banding together creates collective power.

The Women’s Council at Discontent City and Anita Place Women’s Group share goals of increasing women’s leadership in tent cities. Mercedes Courtoreille, an organizer at Discontent City, explained that because most of the homeless population in Nanaimo are men, women feel isolated and like they must rely on male partners to protect them. She says the Women’s Council “gives women a voice where they feel heard... it’s creating a community of women who may not know each other very well, but are supporting each other. They haven’t necessarily had that. A community of women supporting women is long overdue.” In less than one month, the Discontent City Women’s Council has provided locks for single women to lock their tents, arranged a buddy system for women to back each other up, and is about to propose a workshop to help camp residents better understand consent.

Part of the work of our homeless women’s organizing in suburbs and non-metropolitan cities will be to understand not just what gender violence looks like, but why it exists and how it reinforces capitalism and settler-colonization. Canada’s colonial project relies on a western European gender binary that has destroyed Indigenous kinship relations, dispossessed Indigenous people of their territories, and subjugated Indigenous women and Two spirit people. Capitalism similarly relies on the nuclear family form in order to keep economic production going and pass on private property. Because what it means to be a “man” or “woman” shifts in meaning over different places and different periods of time, we will need to embed our explorations of

gender violence in our current context, while also drawing on history to better understand how we got here.

Women have always been leaders in organized Tent Cities, including doing behind-the-scenes labour to make sure that tent cities run smoothly. Forming Women's Councils helps women recognize the value of their labour and skills while fighting patriarchy in the economy and government policy that makes women poor and homeless, and in low-income communities – including tent cities – where women live and struggle.

Anita Place Tent City (Drafted by Ivan Drury)

Anita Place's experiment with forming a camp "Security Council"

June 28th, 2018

One year after the founding of Anita Place tent city, the dynamics in the camp had shifted and it no longer felt like a conscious protest camp – it felt like a drug dealing site that was using a homeless camp as a cover. Some people living in the camp were afraid of enforcers and of people who were coming into camp to pick up or make deals. The camp council and AAD came up with a proposal for how to overcome this problem: to charge the dealers a "tax" for operating in camp by repurposing their enforcers to provide security to the residents of camp, particularly those most vulnerable. But rather than this security operate under the jurisdiction of the dealers (the economic interests), we decided to create a "security council" of women and elders who felt vulnerable to violence. This security council would direct the activity of camp security and hold the security guards accountable.

The danger we faced was that violence will be the undoing

the camp both internally – where it will not longer be safer or better than living out on the street – and legally, where it will be indefensible against a “violence” based injunction. We tried for a couple weeks to get a meeting with the two leading dealers – and actually to get a meeting with their bosses – but it was difficult because our efforts coincided with an escalation of tensions between the different groups that ran the drug economy in camp and that became a barrier to discussion.

Our proposal that we gave them said this:

1. Illicit economies are an organic part of the low-income and street community and we are unable to replace or compete with this economy at this time, and;
2. The business interests of an illicit economy and the survival interests of homeless people are shared in regards to the survival of the tent city, and;
3. The illicit economy has swelled within the camp to such a degree that it is infringing on the living space and means of the community, impacting common residents in a negative way while taking advantage of the existence of this community space to carry out business interests, and;
4. Recent escalations of violence make the camp vulnerable to court injunction, therefore:

We therefore propose that business interests in camp provide security for all campers and not only for direct business interests. We fear that business is using the camp as a cover and not as a community of shared interests. So we propose that as an expression of good will towards that community, business interests provide security to all camper – with the mandate that no violence under any circumstances be carried out within camp gates and that no violence under any circumstances be carried out against any camper, and that this security operate accountable to an elected camp-resident “security council.”

The illicit economy differs from the licit capitalist economy

in the important way that it is illicit, which means that its relationship with police forces is inverted. While the police of the liberal Canadian state are sworn primarily to protect legally sanctioned property and trade of property, part of that protection is to break, smash, and criminalize illicit economies. So, while legal businesses rely on the legally sanctioned violence of the police to keep an order that protects their business interests, illicit business must fear and guard against the police and marshal their own, independent, and criminalized forms of force in order to protect its business interests.

We are not proposing that Anita Place create its own police force. There must be a difference in form here too. Canadian police forces operate in service of legal businesses and property, and are not accountable to communities that they police. If we are not careful, security in Anita Place could replicate the singular interest of policing and only defend the interests of illicit capital. Basically, that's how it is functioning now. We propose that business interests in camp provide resources for security, but not control it independent of the broader community. We propose that security in camp be overseen by, and accountable to, an elected (by secret ballot) camp resident security council made up entirely of people disinterested in business operations and representative of those most vulnerable to violence – specifically, women, particularly Indigenous women, elders, youth, and people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, tensions continued to escalate in camp along with increasing pressure from the police and the city when it returned to court to apply for an injunction to break up the tent city. We were never able to test this proposal, but are sharing it with the gathering because we think it's worth discussing and experimenting with another time.

Open letter from 109 public health professionals

Community controlled health and collective care

Close to 500 residents of Discontent City in Nanaimo, Anita Place in Maple Ridge, and Camp Namegans in Saanich, BC are facing the threat of displacement largely on the basis of health and safety concerns often focused on fire safety at the exclusion of other health and safety risks. Persistent homelessness, visible in the presence of tent cities throughout Canada and particularly in BC, highlights the failure of society to ensure basic human rights and access to the basic determinants of health such as food, water, housing, social supports, self-determination, and freedom from violence and discrimination enshrined in international agreements including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [1] Yet, residents of these tent cities have repeatedly claimed that living in tent cities, in the absence of other acceptable options, improves psychological and physical health including community belonging, autonomy and self-determination. We call on all governments to shift from using public health as a rationale to displace tent cities to adopting a public health approach that

treats fire safety as one factor amongst others to reduce public health and safety concerns associated with homelessness.

OVEREMPHASIZING FIRE SAFETY CAN OBSCURE AND EXACERBATE OTHER HARMS

A frequent and recurring issue related to tent cities is that of safety with often increasing concerns related to fire safety, public order and public health hazards. In BC, in summer, fire hazards are elevated across the province. For people who are homeless, the risk of fire is added to other risks of being homeless such as violence, assault, lack of stable housing, food and food storage as well as resultant health issues. The risk of fire exists whether people live in unsheltered settings alone or in tent cities. The “solutions” to these fire risks in tent cities across the province has been legal actions and fire orders often with conditions that can exacerbate the harms of homelessness. For instance, in Discontent City, the fire order includes a “no tarp” condition which increases exposure to heat for tent city residents. A temperature reading of a tent with and without a tarp recently showed a 5-degree difference, the latter making the tent 40 degrees Celsius. While it is in the interests of everyone to manage fire risks, banning tarps is something we would never dream of doing in a BC Parks campsite.

Homelessness is not a consequence of bad choices but a consequence of bad policies including withdrawal of funding from social housing, privatization of the housing market, erosion of the social safety net, and colonization that has stripped Indigenous people of opportunities, land and resources. As well, there are systemic gaps when people exit corrections, health care, and foster care and gaps between health and social systems. The risks of fire and public disorder are often powerful narratives that fail to recognize the reality of the situation in which tent cities emerge and the conditions in which people live and the lack of access to safe, acceptable and affordable housing and inadequate incomes needed for a decent standard of living. The public health hazards are a lack of

adequate shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation, food, and food storage as well as adequate structures to protect people from the elements and environmental hazards. All of which threaten the health of camp residents.

THE OTTAWA CHARTER: FIVE PRINCIPLES OF A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

International rights to housing and health including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [1] uphold access to adequate physical structures with safe drinking water, heating and lighting, sanitation, food storage, site drainage, energy for cooking and access to emergency services, security of tenure, affordability, and habitability (liveable in terms of protection from weather and potential threats to well-being, accommodate special physical needs with accessibility to services and built with respect to cultural identity and diversity). In addition to this, the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights [2] lays out the importance of self-determination and being able to obtain an adequate standard of living without discrimination.

Public health aims to improve conditions in which people can be healthy through health promotion, health protection, and disease and illness prevention. Canada is a world leader in population health and public health. The Ottawa Charter [3] is an internationally recognized public health framework consisting of five principles meant to guide action to promote the population's health and well-being. In the absence of affordable and appropriate housing, we, the undersigned, call on the provincial government to adopt a public health approach to tent cities in BC by adopting the following five principles:

- I. Build Healthy Public Policy – Healthy public policy means ensuring that all citizens have access to decent housing that is acceptable, culturally appropriate and at a cost that they can afford given minimum wage earnings and/or social assistance rates. In the absence of

implementing evidence-based responses to homelessness, municipal governments should not construct bylaws that unfairly restrict the ability of homeless people, including those living in tent cities, to erect permanent shelter to protect themselves from the elements and provide a measure of safety and stability.

2. Create environments which support healthy living – Recognizing that people who are homeless do not have access to the basic determinants of health, environments should be organized in a way that does not create or contribute to poor health, and instead, improves it. Health protection measures include ensuring access to a safe quality and quantity of water, waste removal, food (including food storage, cooking areas, and refrigeration), hygiene, prevention of communicable disease, pest control, and measures to protect against exposure to cold and heat, electricity, and fire prevention- in other words, just what we all want and need. Health promotion measures include immediate housing placement offered with options, income and disability assistance as needed, and employment assistance if requested. Governments and all organizations should be working with and assisting all homeless people, including maximizing the opportunities for increased health protections possible in tent cities as well as working towards permanent solutions.

3. Strengthen community action on health – Communities themselves must determine what their needs are and how best to meet them. We must ensure that tent city residents maintain autonomy and self-determination over their homes and lives while also gaining access to health, social and public safety services. Governments and all organizations should work with tent city residents to meet their health and safety needs as well as to develop long-term solutions.

4. Help people develop their skills – so that they can

have more control over their health. Governments and all organizations should work with people in tent cities to comply with various safety requirements including safety orders as well as encouraging and supporting the development of peer workers in the provision of health and other services.

5. Reorient health systems – to promote a better balance between health promotion and curative services. Governments and all organizations should ensure that health services for tent cities focus on promotion, prevention and restorative services and include an emphasis on the inclusion of peer workers. Basic health services available to camp residents should include primary care (management of acute and chronic health conditions, wound management, immunizations, screening and assessments); mental health and harm reduction training and support (overdose management and prevention; sterile supplies); and first aid training.

A public health approach means working with residents to implement evidence-based approaches to ending homelessness rather than legal proceedings which are not evidence based, diverting resources and energy from public health solutions and even increasing harms.

Super InTent City Council (Victoria)

Abolish supportive housing: Continuing the fight for homes not jails

April 9th, 2017

The political power of homeless people at Super InTent City won hundreds of new transitional and permanent social housing units in Victoria. While “My Place”, a 40-bed shelter, is set to close at the end of May and “Mt Edwards”, a 38-bed housing facility is currently up for rezoning under NIMBY attack, many SIC residents continue to fight for dignified housing at the PHS-run Johnson Street Community Project, and for the rights of homeless people and those living in supportive housing. Residents report PHS’ efforts at thwarting their political organizing including the latest comments by Andy Bond, Senior Director of Housing, that the PHS Residents’ Council meetings were cancelled due to low turn-out. The Residents’ Council meets weekly without PHS management and released the following statement and demands this week.

We agreed to move from tent city to 844 Johnson Street on the promise that housing would improve our living conditions

not make them worse. We were promised that Portland Hotel Society (PHS) would offer us *different* housing than the institutional, supportive housing we had experienced in the past. We were promised inclusion in decision-making about building operations and policies. We were promised job opportunities. We were promised community kitchens where we could make our own food. We were promised storage for our belongings. We were lied to.

Under the management of PHS, our health and wellbeing has been in steady decline and we demand immediate action to reverse this reality. This building was designed as an institution to house sick and elderly people and it is inappropriate for housing. We are concerned that the water quality, food safety, and environmental quality is substandard. Many of us have experienced getting sicker since getting housed.

Our privacy is being violated. Before we moved in, the doors were taken off the washroom in our suites. We (and our guests) do not have privacy to use the washroom. The common washrooms on each floor are locked resulting in people inappropriately using our common showers to shit and piss.

We are suffering extreme criminalization. It feels like we are living in a jail and our rooms replicate jail cells. We have to ask permission to enter and exit our home. We are under constant surveillance with video cameras on every floor. Information about us is shared without our consent to police and the Ministry of Social Development.

Police presence in and around the building is almost daily. We have witnessed police and PHS management escalating mental health crises. When SWAT comes in our building, we are locked in our rooms or on our floors. Residents are being triggered by police and exhibiting post-traumatic stress responses from personal histories of dealing with police violence and repeated incarceration. Several of us have experienced PHS provoking us and then charging us with mischief or assault, resulting in

court-ordered conditions that limit our freedoms.

PHS' guest policy is unreasonable and discriminatory against people who are homeless and living in poverty. The requirement of ID from our guests ignores the barriers faced by homeless people in getting ID and it is a violation of privacy for PHS to collect the other type of personal information they collect in the absence of ID. We are experiencing social isolation as a result of not being able to have our family and friends over. We have reviewed decisions made by the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) on guest policies in other buildings and in several cases the RTB found that guest policies that restrict hours for guests and/or require guests to show identification breach section 30(I)(b) of the Residential Tenancy Act. We sent a letter to PHS management about these concerns on December 14, 2016 and we were ignored, yet again.

At tent city, we created our own communities and experienced belonging and control over our own lives. Under the management of PHS, our choices, ideas, and participation are ignored and disrespected. For instance, we have developed a Residents' Council with representation from every floor and we are written off and ignored by management. We are never consulted on any decisions in the building.

We are renters who have tenancy rights under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and we expect these rights to be respected. We are using legal mechanisms to challenge PHS' violation of the RTA, but we need the public's help in pushing the following immediate demands of the Portland Hotel Society.

As residents of the Johnson Street Community Project (844 Johnson Street), we demand that PHS immediately:

- Recognize the legitimacy of the Residents' Council and work with us to improve the homes and lives of building residents.
- Throw out the current guest policy and work with the Residents' Council to develop a policy that works for

people who live in this building.

- Ensure access to common rooms and common washrooms on each floor for us and our guests.
- Make available areas for us to prepare and cook our own food.
- Make available secure, storage space for our belongings.
- Show residents proof of independent water, food safe, electrical, asbestos, and environmental testing to ensure quality is up to standards.
- Remove ALL video cameras and recording devices in the building.
- Stop calling police for health issues (e.g., mental health issues). Management and staff should be trained in non-violent crisis intervention. Police presence results in arrests, forced confinement, and charges, NOT help.
- Only permit police entry to the building when: 1) staff and residents call for help in emergency situations; 2) they have a warrant for someone in hand (as opposed to waiting outside someone's unit until they get a warrant); 3) they are in fresh pursuit, or they see someone commit a crime and take refuge in our building.
- End the collection and sharing of our personal information with police and ministry workers.

Ivan Drury

Property, law, and the limits of "rights" for homeless people

Property is what gives meaning to the language of rights for individuals within liberal democracies. Rights are guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to those whose body is recognized as the property of a person. This personhood is a legal category that is cast by its white supremacist, misogynist, bourgeois limits; in other words, in a liberal democracy, rights-bearing persons are legally protected by defining who are not persons.

Personhood is anti-Indigenous because a person owns or leases property that has been wrenched out of Indigenous land relations. Personhood is anti-Asian and anti-Latinx because a person experiences entitlement to Indigenous lands to make their familial home and Asian and Latinx people are racialized as perpetual foreigners, a temporary presence useful to Canada for cheap labour or expensive investments. Personhood is anti-Black because a person is defined by the intrinsic value of whiteness, and Black people are racialized as killable and a danger to white life. Personhood is misogynist and trans-misogynist

because a person is a public man, and women are gendered as private whose unwaged emotional, domestic, and sexual labour is the property of men. Cis women who garnish social power in the public realm are subjected to the lasting economic and ideological inequalities within public spaces that preserve the myth the real place for cis women in society is the home and the real role of cis women is to serve their husband, fathers, and children. Trans women experience the lack of personhood that cis women experience on top of our oppression as trans people – the refusal of personhood for not being cisgender. Personhood is the property of the default figure of the bourgeois white man – and those who do not possess personhood under the law do not have access to rights.

Homeless people are not default persons because police and other persons interpret their presence in public as a threat to property. The City of Nanaimo's application for a Supreme Court injunction to displace the hundreds of people who live in Discontent City names these threats directly. The City claims that tent city residents are a danger to property. Legal attacks on tent cities claim that homeless people endanger property with "increased theft, shoplifting," and the theft of water from nearby spigots, to damaging public property that is entitled to proper persons by "loitering, urinating, defecating," including damaging the public air with "substantial unpleasant odors, including urine, burning chemicals, and burning plastic."

The City claims, "The odor is often strong enough that residents and customers [read: persons] a block or more away from the Tent City have reported that the odor of urine alone is 'overpowering'." The homeless camp's violation of persons includes the symbolic realm – where evidence that "residents, particularly female residents, have altered their travel routes or only go out in the dark with a male family member." Because middle class white women feel unsafe is presented as proof of the material threat that the homeless present to persons. This

Supreme Court application combines hegemonic gender and race ideas with legal protections of the person to frame the frightened white lady as a person and the homeless Indigenous man as a danger to persons.

This does not mean that homeless people – or Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and Black people, women, and working class people – do not have any rights in Canada; it means that a bourgeois white man can expect to be treated as a person, while others must actively claim their personhood with political or legal action. When homeless people come together, take over an empty lot, and start a tent city, they force themselves into view before the public as a social group; they contest their exclusion from personhood and expose the exclusionary limits of Canada's supposedly neutral, liberal-democratic legal-rights framework.

That is why the response of City's, police, and propertied persons to a new tent city is to try to break it up and force it out of public view – they are attempting to break the tent city's political challenge to the hegemonic norms that code liberal personhood as propertied, white, and male. Collective political action can be a sufficient counterforce, a form of power through which oppressed people expose and contest property and liberal personhood.

When homeless people harness enough power to disrupt the property rights that dehumanize them, they appear before the law as persons. Suddenly, the very same legal system that ordinarily assigns homeless people as a danger to the public and to property to recognize homeless personhood. Yet increased visibility of organized homeless people draws out anti-homeless hatred that hardens around the idea society should not permit personhood to the poor. This shift in law and public sentiment is forced by the collective power of homeless people who defy property law and propertied personhood, simultaneously exposing the violence of liberal conceptions of personhood and pushing the Canadian legal apparatus to check their objective

and legal (rather than hegemonic) status.

Public property owners like a city or provincial government bear an unusual legal burden of acting in the interest of the collective landowner – the public – rather than only in the interest of few simple property owners. The everyday administration of laws over homeless people is not a crisis for the system because the law-enforcement priorities of police and bylaw officers are supported by the power of dominant ideology, culture, and economics. That allows them to administer access to public property in a way that ensures the public is made of persons and that homeless people are a threat to that public. That is why, when homeless people set up a tent city, their first challenge is to establish the camp and get a hearing before a court. Cities try first to terrorize homeless people out of their camp using their usual techniques of police harassment and brutality and public humiliation and threats of vigilante violence. But by surviving these threats homeless people can win their day in court.

But this does not mean that homeless people (or any other people dehumanized by propertied personhood) can overturn the structures and legal frameworks of liberal personhood through the law itself. “Winning our day in court” removes the power of the police and public to hegemonically displace and dehumanize homeless people in a tent city because the political visibility of the camp temporarily and exceptionally extends personhood to people who are homeless. This transformation happens before there is a court decision about the status of their personhood rights “in balance of convenience” against the personhood rights of business and property owners. The moment a property owner files for a court injunction to break up a homeless camp it is an acknowledgement that the usual techniques of enforcing property power against homeless people has failed; it means that the police apparatus has not been able to enforce property law against this group of homeless people; it means that this group of homeless people have emerged as persons.

But then once the court proceedings begin, the organized and resistant, class-independent power of the tent city is replaced by the bureaucratic, individualizing, categorical power of bourgeois legal rights. By appearing before a court in the context of testing their Charter rights, someone who is homeless ceases to be only a public danger because they are designated, by the authority of their legal counsel, as a person before the law.

The moment we enter a courtroom to defend ourselves against the brutality of property law, we begin breaking down the collective power that got us there. The process goes like this:

1. Representation replaces self-determination: An agent of the court (a lawyer who is on our side, legally speaking) registers the names of individual clients that they represent. The lawyer immediately acquires the legal responsibility to represent the individual interests of each client. The complex and unstable power of a self-determined group that has established its counterforce outside the law becomes legible and compartmentalized within the legal system through the formal representation of the group as clients represented by an agent of the court.

2. Personhood replaces collective power: The group identity of the tent city before the law is transformed into a consultant group that the individual clients may talk with to make decisions about the case. The collective power of the camp may remain but at best it runs parallel to the legal process. At worst, legal strategies advanced by lawyers are used to question, marginalize, and undermine the radical, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial politics of collective power.

3. Legal power subsumes political power: When it first begins, the tent city relies on collective, creative activity for its survival, including fierce, courageous action and mobilized solidarity and unity in struggle between residents of the camp and other working class and Indigenous peoples. If the camp cannot marshal enough force to hold the police at bay then

it will be smashed. But as the courtroom proceedings begin, the court's recognition of the personhood of clients shifts the base of power from the autonomous, extra-legal power of a social movement to a legal claim to personhood rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. No longer must the camp claim its personhood through political action because the agent of the court claims it through the bureaucratic, formal power of legal representation.

Regardless of whether the hearing concludes with the homeless people displaced or recognized as having the property right to remain in their camp, the result brings us back to property and propertied personhood as the governing rule. In Victoria, homeless people from the Super InTent City fight have explained that winning supportive housing at Johnson Street did not "feel" like a victory exactly because our insurgent power was enclosed and shut away in property – the energy of the movement was replaced by the fixity of the Canadian legal system. While we don't have sufficient force to defend spaces against property forms without using Charter claims under the law, we must recognize that legal power undermines and subverts peoples' extralegal power, and that we enter the courts at great risk to our independent political power and political vision.

Many of the lawyers who have defended tent cities between 2015, when we were most able to use Charter claims to defend camps, and 2019, when that defence has been weakened, are now wanting to take on a new rights-claim: to fight for the right for homeless people to take 24/7 shelter on publicly owned lands. This is an important question for the next phase of our movement because the outcome of such a rights claim will affect all poor and homeless people in BC.

The plus side of a successful Charter challenge for the right to 24/7 shelter on public lands is that it could stop the perpetual displacement of homeless people. But the down side is that it would be up to municipalities to interpret and implement a new

“right” to 24/7 shelter. These are the same governments that interpreted the Shantz Decision -- where homeless people won the right to camp overnight in parks -- into bylaws that dedicate certain parks for camping and increased repressive bylaws to make sure that homeless people are forced into those spaces at night and pushed out of them during the day. We have already seen some signs of how governments manage the legalization of tent cities because in Camp Namegans, Discontent City, and Anita Place there have been windows between the time a government won a displacement injunction and the deadline for displacement. During those times the government has managed the camps. In every case they have taken the opportunity to create prison camps with high fences, 24 hour security and police surveillance. They have closed the camps to visitors, eradicated the street economy, shut the community controlled consumption spaces, and barred activists and banned organizing meetings.

Before we jump to win the right to be homeless, let's carefully consider what that would mean for homeless people's struggles. Would winning the right to be homeless increase our power and capacity to fight against displacement, poverty, and dispossession, and for homes for all? Or would it institutionalize certain public lots as government-organized outdoor shelters? Would it normalize homelessness as a forever part of this society? Poor people's movements benefit from lawyer allies and sometimes we can use contradictions between the law and government policy to increase our power and fight for reforms we badly need, but the law must support and follow people's movements, not the other way around.

